

# Political Correctness – Maintaining a Balanced View

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The paper deals with the concept of the so-called “political correctness”, primarily with regard to how it affects the language, particularly that of the non-native speakers of English, who may sometimes not be sufficiently aware of the sensitivity of the issue in the target language, frequently not nearly as pronounced in their own society and cultural setting.

Not surprisingly, “political correctness” has over the years caused a lot of heated argument and has divided people, not only linguists, into its ardent supporters and detractors. While the former defend it on the grounds that it can effectively combat intolerance, prejudice and injustice, the latter object to it as merely an instrument of political control and manipulation and an impediment to the freedom of speech. They base their argument on the fact that things are sometimes taken too far, many expressions already accepted or suggested as “politically correct” sounding exaggerated, unnatural, and ridiculous. Furthermore, they argue that political correctness frequently obscures the meaning and is directed against clarity, thereby deteriorating the language.

The authors therefore deem it necessary to highlight and explore the arguments of both sides, trying to propose the best ways of dealing with the issue, making all those concerned fully aware of the problem and its implications, at the same time striving to establish and maintain a balance.

## KEY WORDS

- ~ Politically correct speech
- ~ Euphemism
- ~ Periphrasis
- ~ Clarity
- ~ Freedom of speech

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with the issue of political correctness that the authors have been studying and researching for some time now, their observation having been published in the journal *Strani jezici* in 2010. Since the topic was elaborately presented in the above mentioned paper, it is our goal here to try to shed more light upon this extremely important and delicate matter by presenting its other aspects and implications.

Political correctness is undoubtedly very important for EFL teachers as their task is to produce competent and proficient users of English, able to successfully communicate and understand the cultural settings and background of the target language. The subject is also supposed to raise the teachers' and, consequently, the students' awareness of certain social issues such as diversity, flexibility, tolerance, democracy, etc., none of which can be overemphasised in a humanistic approach to education (Plančić and Zanchi, 2010).

However, there have been a number of shifts and changes in the feelings and attitudes, with some doubts and, occasionally, negative criticism gaining ground. Consequently, the authors hereby wish to draw attention to these trends, and to focus on some of the issues that have so far been insufficiently researched and frequently neglected.

The language traditionally used to refer to various minority or identity groups obviously represents a sensitive area, in English and other languages as well. The concept of gender, to mention only one aspect of the so-called ‘politically correct speech’, does not seem to be creating as many problems in Croatian as it apparently does in English. Due to the nature of the Croatian language, gender is clearly morphologically indicated. Consequently, it may be difficult for the Croatian learners of English to understand why it should represent such a disputable issue in English, particularly in view of the fact that there exist morphologically marked forms for most of the nouns referring to both genders: (*glumac – glumica; pjevač – pjevačica; učitelj – učiteljica*, etc.). Some of these have been recently coined in order to fill the void, e.g. *sudac – sutkinja; psiholog – psihologinja; arheolog – arheologinja*.

Similar principles seem to be true of other concepts, such as ethnicity, race, and terms referring to other minority or marginalised groups of population, i.e. they apply to them as well, thereby additionally obscuring the problem as far as native speakers of Croatian are concerned. One of the reasons may lie in the fact that the 'politically correct' terms keep changing all the time and are not easy to keep up with.

## 2. THE BACKGROUND

The origins of political correctness were dealt with and described in our previous paper on that subject. As most linguists believe, the reality and language are closely connected, i.e. how we perceive the world inevitably reflects on our language and vice versa, or, as George Orwell puts it, our thoughts are shaped and determined by language, while language seems to have a strong impact on forming our thoughts (Orwell, 1946). In other words, language strongly influences and determines our view of the world, as well as our beliefs and attitudes. It is hard indeed to imagine any language separated and detached from reality, including its political, economic, cultural, and other social considerations. Consequently, the need to include language into social or political reforms becomes imperative. However, one should always bear in mind that language must by no means be forcibly changed or violated for any political purposes, no matter how important they may seem.

As important and commendable as it is to fight against prejudice, bias, intolerance, and bigotry based on age, ability, physical appearance, sexual orientation, etc., one should be particularly cautious not to push things too far, as some more zealous champions of the cause seem to have done, constantly coining new terms and phrases, mostly euphemisms, which are by many felt to be awkward and dissociated from the common sense, and striking one as condescending, offensive, or simply ridiculous. It is due to these that the principles, beliefs, and commendable intentions of the pioneers of the movement are, unfortunately, frequently being compromised, thereby making the whole idea pointless and even counterproductive.

Furthermore, there have been a number of authors who have found the so-called politically correct speech, frequently due to its attempt to be generally and universally accepted, oblique, indirect, unclear, even insulting in its incessant quest of new synonyms, almost invariably euphemisms, which cannot fail to strike one as inflated, pretentious, condescending, patronising, and insincere, rendering them all the more offensive and insulting.

## 3. SOME IMPORTANT AREAS AFFECTED BY POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

The authors have already tried to draw attention to the most sensitive areas, the most prominent ones being gender-biased language, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, mental and

physical disabilities., etc.

As far as gender is concerned, it might be important to mention some of the most remarkable changes that have taken place over the past decades, i.e. noun compounds ending in *-man* and other gender marked expressions, being changed either to '*person*' or other more neutral nouns: *chairman* vs. *chairperson*, *fireman* vs. *firefighter*, *tradesman* vs. *skilled person*, *old master* vs. *classic artist*, etc.

Similarly, some terms denoting occupations and professions traditionally considered to be the domain of men, and now increasingly performed by women as well, have assumed explicitly female suffixes, such as *-ess*, *-ette*, *-trix* e.g. *manageress* vs. *manager*, *poetess* vs. *poet*, *authoress* vs. *author*, *usherette* vs. *usher*. Likewise, in the acting profession, notably, an interesting phenomenon may be observed, namely, many women seem to prefer to call themselves '*actors*', although there is a female equivalent, '*actress*', and it doesn't seem to have any negative or offensive connotations. As far as nouns morphologically indicating gender are concerned, as in the following pairs: *husband* and *wife*, *brother* and *sister*, *son* and *daughter*, these tend to be increasingly abandoned in favour of what is thought to be neutral and inclusive: *spouse*, *sibling*, *offspring*, though the last has been felt, especially by critics, to be somewhat far-fetched and exaggerated (Plančić and Zanchi, 2010). And what is one supposed to say to the recently advocated use of "parent 1" and "parent 2" instead of the standard and, indeed, natural terms "father" and "mother"? The authors are well aware of the fact that the issue is also social and political, therefore by far exceeding the domain of linguistics. Nevertheless, they feel that language, being extremely important in its own right, should by no means be left to the dictates and tyranny of politicians. This, however, has not proved to convince ardent feminists who do not seem to be happy with the natural order of things. Indeed, any hint at the hideous "masculinity" or "femininity", even in the cases where they are more than natural, sensible, and justified, seems to be taken as an affront, as a direct and deliberate insult to the highly praised and commendable "equality of genders". The authors, however, seem to be inclined to think that such attitudes, especially if taken to the extreme, are, to say the very least, unreasonable, if not downright ludicrous.

When it comes to titles of address preceding surnames, such as *Mr*, *Mrs*, and *Miss*, they were largely considered unfair, putting women in an inferior position. While *Mr*, used as a title of address for men, in no way reveals their marital status, this is not the case with *Mrs* or *Miss*, which is why both are being increasingly replaced with the newly coined *Ms* (pronounced /miz/) since it is inclusive and neutral, thereby making it fully analogous with *Mr*. (Plančić and Zanchi, 2010). What most native speakers of Croatian fail to understand is why the title *Miss*, used of young unmarried women, should be offensive to anyone in any way, but it seems to be beside the point since it apparently makes sense in English. The general trend tends to be, and has been for a number of years, in favour of *Ms*.

As far as racial, ethnic, religious, and minority-related issues

and references are concerned, the same tendencies seem to be at work, i.e. an almost endless succession of terms: '*Negro*', '*Oriental*', '*Latino*', '*American Indian*', '*African-American*', '*African-Caribbean*', '*Native American*', '*Asian*', '*Italian-American*', '*Caucasian*', '*Native Hawaiian*', etc.

In the above examples one cannot help noticing a striking recurrence of periphrasis and other oblique ways of denoting a particular notion, all being contradictory to the underlying rule of clarity and simplicity of language, and almost invariably resulting in vagueness and sometimes in sheer nonsense. Or, as the old saying goes, 'calling a spade a spade' is ultimately much better than calling it, in pseudo-legal jargon, "an excavation device". In constant search of new euphemisms when the old ones have worn out and become stale, this is naturally unavoidable, thereby becoming the primary target of all kinds of opponents and detractors who have called such language, which is not entirely ungrounded, insincere, pompous, condescending, meaningless, and ridiculous. It should therefore not come as a surprise that this opinion should be shared, on more than one occasion, by members of the very groups concerned.

It is along these lines that it might be advisable to mention the term *deracialisation*, as one of the most important segments of the politically correct speech. The majority of the originally neutral terms have over time become devalued, sometimes even assuming negative connotations, not to mention becoming stale and hackneyed, e.g. '*Negro*', '*coloured*', '*black*', '*Afro-American*', '*African-American*'. And the list seems to go on and on.

The issue of mental health has always been an exceptionally delicate one since people afflicted by mental disease were, and often still are, regarded as a liability, even by the closest family. Consequently, when it comes to psychiatric patients, one should take particular care to always refer to these people in a thoughtful and tactful manner. It is for these very reasons that once approved syntagms such as '*lunatic asylum*', '*asylum*', '*mental institution*' or simply '*institution*', or, more humorous, '*looney bin*', '*happy farm*', '*funny farm*', etc., are to be avoided and replaced with more adequate terms such as '*psychiatric hospitals*' or '*psychiatric clinics*'.

As far as other minority groups are concerned, people with various disabilities, as well as people with different sexual orientations, seem to have aroused most heated arguments. The former are best referred to as '*visually impaired*', '*persons with hearing impairment*', '*disabled*', '*mentally challenged*', '*differently abled*', '*people with special needs*', rather than the habitual expressions such as '*handicap*', '*handicapped*', '*invalid*' and '*invalidity*', '*blind*', '*deaf*', etc. However, some of them appear to be rather indirect and periphrastic and are therefore frequently perceived as imprecise and unclear ('*visually impaired*' for '*blind*', '*hard of hearing*' or '*persons with hearing impairment*' for '*deaf*', or '*persons with special needs*' for people afflicted by physical or mental deficiencies, etc.), apart from sounding pretentious and condescending. This is why the zealous efforts of the proponents

of political correctness strike many as being, to put it mildly, unnecessary and uncalled for, even exaggerated and blown out of proportion, particularly by the population to which the terms are supposed to refer.

As far as other minority groups are concerned, the latter group, namely, homosexuals, transsexuals, etc. seem to have attracted the greatest amount of attention, which may to a certain extent be accounted for by the fact that they have indeed been most exposed to ridicule, contempt, and prejudice. This can be corroborated by an amazingly long list of derogatory terms used to refer to them ('*queen*', '*queer*', '*fairy*', '*poofter*', '*faggot*', '*dyke*', '*butch*', '*gay*'). Although the above words are abusive for the most part, the acceptability of some of them seems to have been varying, rising or abating, depending on the current social and political situations and trend, as well as the degree of acceptance by the groups themselves. The word to have gained ground and stuck, despite the fact that it was once one of the many words intended to be derisive, is the word '*gay*'. Not only has it become the acceptable colloquial and informal equivalent of the formal '*homosexual*', but it is currently the term favoured by the group themselves and has been in use for quite some time (Plančić and Zanchi, 2010). It might be interesting to note that the adjective '*gay*' is no longer used in its former meaning ("A poet could not but be gay / In such a jocund company" – William Wordsworth): it has been completely obliterated and ousted by the newly acquired one, especially in the predicative use. Curiously enough, it has never been converted or back-formed into other parts of speech (noun or verb), as was the case with the participial adjective '*coloured*' which was also used as a noun, assuming the inflectional plural suffix – *s*.

As far as age is concerned, most people seem to be particularly sensitive, as they have customarily been the target of ridicule, prejudice, and unfair treatment. Prejudice against this group, known as '*ageism*', has been formed by analogy after the older term '*sexism*'. Old people thus came to be called '*elderly*', and '*older*', or, as has been jokingly suggested, '*chronologically gifted*' or '*chronologically challenged*', also replacing the term '*old age*' with the the 'politically correct' '*youth deficiency*'. However, the above group is nowadays invariably referred to as '*people of the third age*' or '*senior citizens*'.

#### 4. CRITICAL OBJECTIONS

The so-called "*political correctness*" has, over the past few decades, apart from attracting a great deal of interest and attention, gained a great deal of critics and opponents. It may be also said that the term, along with its numerous implications, has assumed a number of negative connotations.

Among the very first critics of the so-called "*politically correct speech*" was the English author George Orwell who, as early as the 1940-ies and 1950-ies, seemed to have anticipated most of the future trends and developments, predicting an

overall deterioration of the language as it increasingly came to be used to suit various political and other non-linguistic (and non-cultural) needs, at the expense of standard norms of clarity of thought and speech, often going as far as manipulating and, frequently deliberately obfuscating the thought and the clarity of expression with a view to deceiving and manipulating people. In his world-famous essay entitled *Politics and the English Language* (1946) Orwell anticipated and announced the political and demagogical (ab)use of the language that was to take place in the following decades, pertaining notably to totalitarian states and doctrines, his native England, unfortunately, being no exception. His statement about language, political language as being a means of, not expressing one's thoughts, but frequently concealing the fact that one has no thoughts, has become famous and often quoted, even outside the English speaking world.

One of the basic and most valid linguistically based arguments in favour of this view is that language is freely and naturally determined and formed by its users and that the changes cannot and shouldn't be decreed or prescribed. Favouring some words and expressions at the expense of other, perfectly good and valid ones, as well as replacing them with frequently vague, awkward, and, in view of many, ugly periphrases, especially doing so for reasons that have nothing to do with linguistics, can be, and indeed is, by many perceived as violating the freedom of thought and speech, a tyranny as a result of which language is noticeably deteriorating. As early as 1946, criticising political speech as a blatant abuse of language, George Orwell wrote: "... the English language is in a bad way, ..." (Orwell, 1946). If this statement was true at that time, how much more has the situation worsened in the meantime?

At this point it might be good to mention certain newly coined expressions resulting from an overzealous wish to meet the requirements of "political correctness", or, as some would prefer, of pushing things too far. The following are humorous and clearly meant to make people laugh. Nevertheless, they may serve to illustrate a situation in which standard (and clear!) English words are occasionally mockingly replaced with vague periphrasis and ridiculous euphemisms in an attempt to conform to the demands of "newspeak", thus creating a great source of ideas for satire and ridicule, as exemplified by the following syntagms:

dead	– metabolically different
alive	– temporarily metabolically able
psychopath	– socially misaligned
bald	– follicularly challenged
short	– vertically constrained
stupid	– intellectually challenged
paper bag	– processed tree carcass
old age	– youth deficiency

## 5. CONCLUSION

The use of politically correct language, which started in

English and spread to many other languages, was caused by an ever increasing social and political consciousness that all people should be treated with consideration and respect, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, age, sexual preferences etc. Politically correct language reflects all the changes in modern society that have taken place with the growth of awareness of the rights of various minority and underprivileged groups. However, there are many opponents of this language reform who think that the things may have gone too far. Some of them claim that political correctness endangers the freedom of speech and thought.

Such an important issue can by no means be ignored, therefore the authors deem it necessary for all the ESL students and speakers to familiarise themselves with these changes in order to help them towards a better understanding of the culture in which they might work, visit or do business one day. This seems to be particularly true of seafarers, whose jobs are inevitably associated with the use of the English language, indeed requiring a good command of it. Furthermore, when it comes to teaching lexis, the topic offers a wide range of very useful vocabulary. It is also an exceptionally rewarding topic for discussion as most students are ready to participate and contribute. And, finally, it is a great delight for teachers as they mostly relish the prospect of teaching language and expanding the students' vocabulary, at the same time promoting justice, non-discrimination, and equality (Plančić and Zanchi, 2010).

At the same time, the authors feel that particular care should be taken to avoid extreme solutions, the majority of which have for a long time now been considered pretentious and inflated, a laughing stock, thereby undermining all, basically good and honourable intentions aimed at adapting the language use in such a way that it should not offend or exclude any member of society.

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